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Maguire, R. (2017). Conference Review: Fields of Dreams. An overview of the EAC10 conference, Leiden, 20th to 22nd April 2017. *EXARC Journal*, 2017(2), 38-39.

Published in:
EXARC Journal

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
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Conference Review: Fields of Dreams

An overview of the EAC10 conference, Leiden, 20th to 22nd April 2017

| Rena Maguire (UK)



Fig 1. Participants during the break visiting different booths and posters; display. Photo: Pascale Barnes

The 10th Experimental Archaeology Conference of EXARC took place in Leiden, Netherlands, from the 20th to the 22nd April 2017. The first two days hosted a diverse range of presentations, while the final day consisted of a visit to Vlaardingen prehistoric house-building project and Eindhoven Museum.

The conference started with the three reconstructions of the Gislinge boat, by **Dr Sørensen and Dael**, with each event drawing more interest. This was achieved by involvement of people from all over the world, from locals in education and community groups to various social mediums, all disseminating differing layers of information from 'lifestyle' images on Instagram to a website created for the more committed enthusiast, as much as the academic. This talk was followed by Leiden University's **Professor van Gijn and her team** who were instrumental in the Vlaardingen Broekpolder house project. In developing a prehistoric community, they reconnected with a modern one, echoing Sørensen and Dael's theme of capturing the imagination and involvement of the professional academic, student, interested 'civilian' and traditional craftsperson alike.

In recent years, experimental archaeology has increased in popularity due, in no small part, to pioneering universities. The examination and analysis of the past through reconstruction of lifestyle, chaîne opératoire of manufacture and the efficacy of produced materials is not new. Archaeological experiential sites, such as Britain's Butser Farm, have added greatly to understanding and reconstructing the past. As such, experimental archaeology has developed into a staunchly academic discipline, invaluable for gaining knowledge of the past, and an unsurpassed means to engage with the public.

This theme of experimental archaeology as a means of engagement was part of University College Dublin's (UCD) effusive presentation on the reconstruction of early medieval roundhouses in Ireland, with **Professor O'Sullivan and Dr O'Neill** fully engaging the conference delegates. The experimental unit of UCD archaeology has a highly active social media profile, and could be said to have built a community around that.

The dissemination of knowledge via social media has proved invaluable in the rise of the public perception of experimental archaeology, with **Dr Postma** utilising YouTube videos to demonstrate the reconstruction of a medieval turf-walled byre with the University of Groningen.

Dr Tomsons of the Latvian National History Museum examined the working technologies used to produce metal artefacts in the eastern Baltic region. The region appears to have a much higher density of moulds and crucibles than would correlate with the number of metal objects found in the area, and Tomson has been exploring the possible reasons for this. His presentation issued in a series of metal-themed speakers, with **Professor Thornton** of Buffalo State University displaying next his discoveries on how to make soft iron tools much harder so they could be used to work on other metals. **Godino and Bartoni** of University of Siena and ARES experimental unit offered insight into the production of refined

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silver using the methods of the Early Medieval period. **Dr O'Neill** of UCD drew the audience into his hypotheses of why Early Medieval Ireland has a lack of moulds and crucibles. He asked if Ireland's paucity could be due to re-use of bi-valve moulds?

Professor Baena Preysler's team from University of Madrid examined natural attrition and rounding of lithic tools, while Cambridge's **Ladanyi** offered his take on the possible shifts of interpersonal aggression, expressed by the use of archery, in the European Neolithic. Leiden's **Gentile** opened a debate on the difference between real life or death fights compared to reconstructed combat in his examination of use-wear on Bronze and Iron Age swords. Still, it was the restrained and human reconstruction of a late Mesolithic baby sling from Skateholm, Sweden, decorated with boars' teeth, which proved to be the most humanising of the presentations. **Rainio** and **Tamboer**, from Helsinki University, demonstrated how the teeth would have created a soothing rattle each time the sling was moved. Afterwards, **Pitone's** presentation of Newcastle University's fresh look at copper smelting in Pyrgos-Mavroraki in Cyprus, energised a classical archaeological site to new relevance.

Day two started with a passionate *tour de force* of experimental archaeology by **Professor Messner** from the State University of New York at Potsdam. He reinforced how experimental archaeology can potentially engage all sciences, creating a platform for multi-discipline projects. The theme of experimental archaeology engaging the wider educational community continued with **Professor Comendador** and **Lackinger** from Granada and **Figuerido** of Lisbon, and **Professor Schindler** of Washington College.

The next few papers looked at how people deal with changing and turbulent times in their lives and landscapes with **Professor Ollich and team**, of l'Esquerda, Spain, examining the reconstruction methods of a Carolingian wooden watch-tower, while Schepers of Groeningen examined crop cultivation on terps. Different aspects of firing ceramics were then examined, firstly by University of Amsterdam's **Dr Jeffra**, then **Costa and team** from University of Trento.

Dr Kamper's experiments in prehistoric tanning techniques showed the dedication required by experimental archaeologists. Less grisly, but equally interesting was the examination of wrapped mummified animals from ancient Egypt by **Drs Woolham** and **McKnight** of Birmingham University. The theme of the treatment of the dead continued with a lively presentation by **Dr Tapavički-Ilić** on the cremation practices of Roman Viminacium.

Reconstruction was the name of the game for the next few papers, with **Rogier** and **Dr Napierala** presenting the workings of a pottery workshop in Campus Galli open-air museum, Germany, while **Clerbaut's team** from Ghent recreated Roman heating tiles. Zagreb's **Kudelić** asked if we can ever really accurately reconstruct prehistoric pottery exactly as it would have been. **Dr Hopkins** presented her results of experiments in dyes used in Pompeii, while the penultimate speakers from the Tel Aviv University brought the themes back to engagement, collaboration and involvement. The final thoughts of the conference came from **Professor Hurcombe** of University of Exeter. Her summary reinforced what the enthusiastic audience already knew – that experimental archaeology is about asking questions, and having the passion and dedication to try and answer them.

The thing which was most noticeable was the sheer energy and passion of all participants and their willingness to share ideas and discuss their work. It bubbled with new ideas, new collaborations, energy and good humour.

TIP

Please see the EXARC Journal Digest 2017-1 for the keynote lecture of the EAC10 conference: *The Gisdlinge Boat Open Source Project: An Old Boat and a New Idea*, pp 6-10.



We expect to publish more articles from the #EAC10 conference in our upcoming online issues, for example about:

- *Making medieval food* by Scott Stull
- *Kicking Ash* by Neil Peterson
- *'Re-rolling' a mummy* by Lidija McKnight
- *Adze-plane, Skeparnon, multipurpose adze or two-handed adze?* by Rüdiger Schwarz
- *The Forgotten Movement – A (Re)construction of Prehistoric Dances* by Ivana Turčin
- *Animal Teeth in a Late Mesolithic Woman's Grave, Reconstructed as a Rattling Ornament on a Baby Pouch* by Riitta Rainio & Annemies Tamboer
- *An Experimental Diachronic Exploration Of Patination. Methodology of Dark-Patinated (Arsenical) Copper Alloys (Hmti-Km, Hemty Kem) on Case Studies From the Eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age and Early Iron Age* by Marianne Talma
- *The Experimental Building Of A Wooden Watchtower In The Carolingian Southern Frontier* by Imma Ollich-Castanyer et al.